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SUBJECT: GOM POLL SHOWS DECLINE IN PM ABDULLAH'S POPULARITY
ON EVE OF PRESUMED ELECTIONS

REF: DANIELS TO EAP EMAIL OF 5 FEB 08

Classified By: POLITICAL SECTION CHIEF MARK D. CLARK, REASON 1.4 (B AND D).

11. (S) Summary: A secretive government poll revealed a 30 percent drop in Prime Minister Abdullah's approval rating since 2004, according to a retired senior intelligence official and current advisor to the Prime Minister. This matches recent findings by a private survey. With unpopular economic decisions and opposition figure Anwar Ibrahim's eligibility to run for office on the horizon, however, our political contacts and the Malaysian public widely believe PM Abdullah will dissolve Parliament, possibly as soon as this week, in order to hold elections by early March. Despite a dip in Abdullah's popularity, no one expects his National Coalition to substantially lose its strong grip on power as a result of the impending election. End summary.

12. (S) An opinion poll recently conducted secretly by the Malaysian government revealed a 30 percent decline in popular support for Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi since 2004, according to Othman Abdul Razak (protect), former head of the Malaysian External Intelligence Organization (MEIO) and current advisor to the Prime Minister. (Note: Normally the Special Branch of the police, charged with domestic intelligence, carries out such polling. End Note.) Othman told polchief February 10 that the "secret" survey indicated an approval rating of approximately 60 percent, down from a very high approval rating of some 90 percent around the time of the March 2004 national election. Economic concerns, particularly over inflation, and declining support among ethnic Chinese and Indians helped explain the drop in Abdullah's approval rating, per the government's own survey.

13. (C) With more difficult economic choices ahead, including unpopular increases in fuel prices, Abdullah and the ruling National Coalition intended to proceed imminently with a snap election, according to Othman, echoing a widely held view on election timing. The Prime Minister had already selected the polling date, which Othman indicated would be in early March, entailing dissolution of Parliament "very soon" in February followed by a short campaign period. The Political Secretary to the Deputy Prime Minister, Mohamad Fatmi Che Salleh, provided polchief with a similar message on election timing, as have many other political contacts.

14. (U) In public remarks February 10, Prime Minister Abdullah declined to refute reports that he could dissolve Parliament as early as February 13. Election preparations by Abdullah's United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and all other political parties are in very high gear.

15. (C) Comment: Despite the dip in PM Abdullah's

popularity, no one expects his National Coalition to substantially lose its strong grip on power represented by winning two-thirds or more of the national Parliament seats. The government's own polling, as conveyed by Othman, appears to track very closely with the publicized findings of the private Merdeka Center's December survey (ref email). The Merdeka Center showed Abdullah's overall approval rating in peninsular Malaysia dropping from 91 percent in November 2004 to 61 percent in late December 2007. The Merdeka Center's figures also reveal that major increases in fuel prices of 20 to 30 percent correspond to an 11 to 15 percent drop in public approval of the Prime Minister. Ahead of the price rises and prominent opposition figure Anwar Ibrahim's eligibility to run for office as of mid-April, Malaysians widely anticipate the Prime Minister will dissolve Parliament in the very near future, perhaps this week, and pave the way for elections by early March.

KEITH